



Johnson Elementary School Review Report April 2016

Johnson Elementary School Review
April 13-15, 2016

School Principal: Ralph Pilz

Date of Review: April 13-15, 2016

School Review Team:

Simon Blakesley, Director, Student Achievement/System Accountability, Yukon Education
Sharon Shadow, First Nations Educational Consultant, Yukon Education
Shari Worsfold, Primary Curriculum Consultant, Yukon Education
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Meetings with the School included:

- Students
- Teachers and support staff
- School Council members
- School administration

School Context

Johnson Elementary School (JES) is a K-7 school located in the community of Watson Lake. Approximately 125 students are enrolled, 70% of whom are of First Nations ancestry. There are 19 staff positions at the school, including 8.5 classroom teachers, a Kaska Language Teacher, a Reading Recovery Teacher, 1.5 full-time Learning Assistant Teachers, a half-time Learning Together Centre teacher, 0.5 Counsellor, 7 Educational Assistants, and a principal.

Johnson Elementary School has been through five years of change. Staff turnover, and especially administrative change, has created discontinuity in terms of procedural and policy protocols. During the 2013-2014 school year, a handbook was reinstated and changes were made in the Special Education procedures to ensure commonality with the Student Support Services handbook and protocols.

JES students are generally courteous but require consistent supervision especially on the playground. A student council was formed to encourage strong leadership and readiness for high school. The staff works hard to create a positive atmosphere through respectful interactions, expansive displays of student work, and bulletin boards with themes, sports, special activities and clear expectations.

The “JES Cares” motto has been used as the scaffolding for “filling our buckets” with random acts of kindness. The theme of *generosity* provides focus, with fundraising for Jump Rope for Heart, for Cystic Fibrosis research, the Terry Fox Run for cancer research taking place. A staff focus has been placed on one aspect of literacy – being able to extrapolate knowledge, make inferences, and synthesize the knowledge

Priorities:

Johnson Elementary School strives to be a safe, caring, respectful and culturally inclusive environment. We will be focussed on successfully implementing a Balanced Literacy Approach to literacy instruction, school-wide and technology integrations for increased focus and achievement.

Norms and Culture:

Characteristics:

Continuously improving schools are socially and culturally inclusive with high expectations for each learner. A focus on continuous improvement is evident.

Observations of the Team:

- The team was impressed at the very calm, caring, and relaxed atmosphere that exists at JES. This creates an empowering tone that is supportive of learning. The team heard from staff that there is a ‘family’ atmosphere at the school, and that students are the strength at JES
- Students at JES are very thoughtful and readily shared with the team their ideas and what they like about JES. It was clear to the team that the students feel pride in their school and notice that their school is becoming an even better place
- Staff shared with the team their focus on the holistic approach to working with students, the development of consistent routines dependent on the setting, and a restorative practice model to resolving conflict
- Some students commented that they are in no rush to leave JES at the end of grade 7. Some shared with the team that older siblings now in high school would like to come back to the school given what they hear about the JES and its positive atmosphere and activities
- Related to the above, students shared with the team that they know their teachers care about them and have positive relationships with them. All students with whom the team talked indicated that they have a “go-to” adult that they are connected to and can discuss any problems or issues with them

- The team heard from all participants that there is a very strong desire to work with Liard First Nation to better incorporate Kaska language, culture, and world-views into the daily functions of the school. Regular culture camps were suggested as a positive way to do this, given students' interest in them
- A strong Kaska language program supports the students: all students learn Kaska in primary school, though this becomes an option in the intermediate years
- The school culture at JES is one where students also support each other: there is an SRC (Student Representative Council) that students can participate in. Older members help younger students on the playground and in the school, and take on leadership roles and activities
- The team noted that there is an abundance of Kaska culture, photos, and history in the front entrance. Many examples of high-quality student work are also displayed throughout the school. This includes both academic work as well as the display of cultural activities. School Council appreciates the efforts by the school to include the cultures of students new to the school
- Staff members shared with the team that there has been a stronger, more stable and thoughtful leadership presence that is visible through the principal at JES, and that this is greatly appreciated given the previous history of frequent turnover in the principalship
- While the team observed thoughtful and dedicated staff members working with JES students, some participants shared that they did not perceive the staff to be as cohesive a team as it could be
- Related to the above, the team heard some participants make reference to the perception of there being "cliques" or a "hierarchy of staff" when describing the staff culture at JES. This perception was described as a limiting factor on the ability of the staff to work effectively as a team

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the very positive efforts and activities already underway to make JES a thoughtful and caring school for all students
- Continue and extend the work already being done to incorporate Kaska language and culture into all curricular aspects of the school
- Continue the efforts underway to promote Elders in the school on a regular basis to support student learning

- Give thought to ways that Kaska language and culture classes do not have to be an “either-or” choice that parents need to make for their children after the primary grades
- Explore ways to better understand the perceptions of staff with respect to their ability to work as a team. Identify and address any barriers as a means to promote open communication and foster stronger working relationships

School and Community

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools build a shared commitment to success for each learner. The school collaborates with parents, students, school council, First Nations and community to support student learning. Ongoing parent/community involvement is embedded in school culture and the school communicates about progress and challenges in multiple ways.

Observations of the Team:

- The team heard from staff and school council of the strong efforts on behalf of JES to be a community school that reaches out and strives to work with the community of Watson Lake
- Not only does the school readily invite parents and community to the school, but efforts are also made to reach out and take school activities into the community. Examples include the potential for talent show (a joint effort between JES and WLS) at Two Mile Hall, a banquet for grade 7 and 12 students with traditional regalia worn, students engaging with CIBC, community barbecues, the Ripples of Kindness initiative, collecting donations for the food bank, and the CARES program
- The team heard that the Watson Lake Recreation Complex is a valuable after school resource, and that students enjoy the activities and homework club offered there. Older students from WLS work there as mentors to JES students
- JES utilizes a Facebook page to communicate with parents as this is a tool that parents readily engage with on a regular basis
- The team observed the welcome that parents and students receive each morning as they enter the school. Kaska language is used to greet children and their parents
- As community representatives, the school council shared with the team that there is a distinctly positive change with how the school is perceived and that there is now a sense of promise with respect to JES
- School council shared with the team that they are keen and supportive of increased community and cultural presence and activities at JES. Ideas include the development of an outdoor classroom with a wall tent

- School goals are clearly and frequently communicated by JES to the school council. The council is aware of and updated regularly regarding the school's focus on balanced literacy and PBIS (Positive Behavioural Interventions and Support) and fully supports the school and staff in this work

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the dedicated, positive efforts to reach out to the community, share the work and talents of students, and include community members in the broader work of the school
- Continue to foster the very positive working relationship between the school, its administration, and the school council, coupled with the clear focus on student well-being and achievement
- Continue the efforts already underway to make connections with Liard First Nation and work with the 3rd party management currently in place to promote the need for a CELC (Community Education Liaison Coordinator) and/or ESW (Education Support Worker) to support students, families, and the school in their work together
- Continue to seek ways to reach out to the LFN parent group, LAWS (Liard Aboriginal Womens' Society) and other agencies to foster further connections within and throughout the community

School Organization

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools organize structures, actions, and interventions to ensure success for each learner. Work in the school is coherent and aligned to focus on improvement. Actions and interventions include effectively differentiating resources, time and professional development to get results. The Department supports the school and makes connections across the Territory to build capacity.

Observations of the Team:

- The team heard and observed the efforts on the part of all staff at JES to utilize a balanced literacy approach in the aim to further increase students' achievement levels. Resources and support from Yukon Education are readily deployed at JES in support of this work
- There has been a focused effort at JES to create more leadership opportunities for students. The organization of an SRC and activities which see students helping other students has been a very positive development since the last review

- ‘Forest Fridays’ are planned to take students outdoors for science, culture, and other curricular activities. This is done using a buddy-system that pairs older and younger students together
- Students shared that they would like to see more computers in the computer lab as some have been removed and placed in classrooms
- The team heard of the very strong extra-curricular program at JES. It was clearly apparent that the staff work hard to organize meaningful activities (e.g. running, cup stacking, Lego™, ukulele, card games, knitting) in six-week blocks, and that students value these opportunities highly
- A greater emphasis has been placed on creating experiential opportunities for students. Carving, visits by grade 7 students to the Industrial Education lab at WLS, and taking students outdoors to gather plants were some examples heard
- The principal and school growth planning team employ data and evidence to guide organizational decision-making around such matters as professional development and the deployment of staff resources
- The team heard that there are improved linkages between WLS, JES, the Recreation Complex, and other schools. Examples include planning a track and field day, the participation of JES students in a “junior REM” in Faro, and collaboration with Teslin School
- A recently developed awards program is clearly displayed in the school’s main foyer. Plaques representing a dozen student awards are now in place as an incentive and mode of recognition of student achievement
- The team heard from the principal and the school council that staffing and hiring is being approached strategically as a means to help the school meet its goals and further improve the programming offered to students
- Related to the above, the team noted that Physical Education (PE) resources and activities could be maintained coordinated more rigorously at JES, perhaps as a result of there not currently being a dedicated staff position specifically for PE
- School Council takes an active role in the organization of teacher recognition as a means of celebrating and acknowledging the efforts of staff at JES
- Educational assistants shared with team members that greater collaboration and teamwork in planning between teachers and EAs is an area worthy of greater attention. Some staff shared that the use of support staff may not be as efficient as it could be, and that at times overlaps occur

- Some staff shared that more collaboration in general amongst staff would be beneficial for planning, discussing teaching, and increasing awareness of what was occurring at other grade levels. Currently, there does not appear to be specific times when this could occur

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the dedicated efforts to collect, organize, and present data in ways that inform the school's activities (with particular emphasis on literacy) and knowledge of student abilities and achievement levels
- Consider reviewing staffing in ways that could provide greater focus and attention to Physical Education in the school
- Continue to seek ways to further develop staff skills and knowledge in balanced literacy approaches to ensure consistency across all levels
- Explore ways to create increased opportunities for teachers and EAs to collaborate and plan their work together, and that EA deployment does not overlap resources

School Processes and Progress

Characteristics: Continuously improving schools take responsibility for improving outcomes for students. They use evidence to guide decisions and actions and have processes in place to collectively monitor progress and make adjustments in key areas of their work. They demonstrate improvement over time – for individual students, groups of students, and the school.

Observations of the Team:

- The team was impressed with the strong, thoughtful efforts at JES to collect data and evidence, review and reflect upon what was gathered, and then use what was learned to guide teaching and decision-making
- The above point notwithstanding, some staff suggested that there could be greater consistency with respect to the types of data collected and a clearer plan with respect to data collection across the school year
- With respect to school growth planning, the team sensed that not all staff were conversant with the school growth plan nor were they familiar with the previous school review and its recommendations

- Given the school’s focus on literacy, monthly school-wide writes are conducted along with running records in order for staff to gain a clear understanding of student literacy levels and their progress
- In response to the previous review, the number of students on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) has been reduced and more functional and understandable Student Learning Plans implemented
- The school council shared with the team that the principal regularly shares with them student data and evidence (in ways that preserve and protect confidentiality) and that this is greatly appreciated
- As a result of the activities mentioned above, the team sensed that there is a strong awareness of student achievement levels on the part of staff, administration, and school council
- The team heard from all review participants the dominant theme of student absenteeism, the recognition that this is an area requiring more work, and a desire on everyone’s part to seek ways to support families and students to attend school
- The team was impressed with what could be described as a “growth mindset” and no deficit-thinking was observed at JES. The team noted many of the activities by staff to be continuous learners, and a positive approach to teaching and life-long learning

Recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue the excellent efforts to develop and utilize locally-generated data and evidence on student progress to help gauge success and identify where adjustments to practice or resources may be required
- Consider holding parent/teacher interviews off-site and in the community as a means of promoting increased parent engagement
- Give longer-term thought and consideration to how numeracy may also be supported in addition to the solid efforts being directed towards the promotion of literacy
- Ensure that all staff are involved and have input into the school growth plan, and are conversant with this document given that it is central to the ongoing growth and directions of JES

- Continue the strong efforts to use data to inform teaching and planning. Moving forward as a staff, at the start of the school year plan the frequency and types of data collection that aligns with the cycle of teaching at JES

In conclusion

The team thoroughly enjoyed the time spent meeting with students, staff, administration, and school council at Johnson Elementary School. It was clear to the team that there is a calm, caring, and thoughtful atmosphere present, coupled with a deliberate focus on supporting students personally and academically.

Progress has most certainly been made since the previous review as a result of the school and community working together in support of students and their learning. The team heard clearly the strong desire on the part of all participants to work more closely with Liard First Nation (LFN) and that the current operational constraints presenting this organization, while challenging, are ones to be worked through until local operations are resumed.

Given the progress since the last review as a result of dedicated staff, a supportive school council, connections with the community, and explicit growth goals, the team is confident that with continued efforts, reflection, and focus JES will only continue on a positive path that values and supports all learners.

Practices to share:

Promising practices

- The development of a Student Representative Council that fosters meaningful leadership opportunities at the elementary school level
- The highly organized and developed extra-curricular system which provides a wide range of very popular activities for students
- ‘Forest Fridays’ which take students outside on Friday afternoon for activities that support learning

Considerations for Yukon Education

- Consider the development of a model which fosters teacher literacy leaders at the school level (distinct from a literacy consultant) as a means to more regularly support staff as they work to achieve literacy goals

- Explore ways that the results of vision screening conducted by Health Department staff can be shared with teachers so that they can be aware of students requiring vision support
- Review the current playground in light of the old wing having been removed. School council would like to see the creation of a more “kid-friendly” front area of the school, and the development of an outdoor classroom space
- Consider the inclusion of playground equipment that meets the needs of intermediate students, as well as the installation of soccer posts that are safe for students
- Explore ways to expand the pool of available substitute teachers, understanding that this can be a challenge faced by many rural schools
- Consider installing a dust collector in order that the school can use the multi-purpose room as a hand-tools and industrial/experiential education workspace in a safe and healthy manner